

AN IRISH AMERICAN RESPONSE TO THE DEATH OF CONG. JOHN LEWIS & THE RISE OF THE BLM MOVEMENT

July 29, 2020

Honorable Karen Bass
Chairwoman, Congressional Black Caucus
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C., 20515

Dear Cong. Bass,

As Irish Americans we wish to express our condolences and deep sorrow on the passing of Cong. John Lewis who many of us were fortunate to know and all of us greatly admired. John Lewis was first a foot soldier in the civil rights movement as Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), then its heroic champion and conscience of the Congress. We also write to tell you that we fully support those peacefully protesting in support of the Black Lives Matter movement for racial justice.

John Lewis is well remembered by our Irish American community for his staunch support for the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland in the 1960s and all through the Troubles. The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, which was formed in 1967, took direct inspiration from the American civil rights movement, particularly its commitment to non-violence. Over the course of several years, this unique effort in non-violent protest was met with fierce and violent resistance culminating in Bloody Sunday in Derry in 1972.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a special hero of John Hume, the leader of the Irish civil rights movement and like Dr. King, a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. A photograph of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. hangs on the wall of his Irish home in a place of honor right next to the photograph of President John F. Kennedy. In a 1985 speech at the University of Massachusetts, John Hume declared 'the American civil rights movement gave birth to ours. The songs of your movement were ours also.'

As Irish American leaders we have worked for decades to support the American civil rights movement going as far back as the great 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington. Our support has taken many forms registering voters in Mississippi, joining John Lewis on his annual pilgrimage to walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, being arrested with John to uphold his commitment to make "good trouble" and working in the Congress to protect voting rights.

Several of us on this letter were honored to join John on his last trip to Ireland in 2014 which was

organized by the Faith and Politics Institute. During his visit John delivered the first O'Connell-Douglass lecture at Iveagh House, home of Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs. John spoke with his usual passion to forgive yet prevail and shared the experience of Frederick Douglass meeting Daniel O'Connell, and O'Connell's lasting influence on Douglass. Daniel O'Connell, the Great Irish Liberator and friend to Frederick Douglass, had spoken for the Irish when he said, "There is nothing politically right that is morally wrong."

The delegation then traveled to Derry in Northern Ireland, the site of the 1972 Bloody Sunday massacre of civil rights demonstrators, where John joined John Hume in leading a march over the Peace Bridge, built after the cease fire to connect Derry's Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods. John Lewis's speeches in Dublin and Derry follow in a history, over a century long, of solidarity and engagement between Ireland and Black America.

The historic relationship between Irish America and Black America has been much more conflicted, often defined by racial antagonism as well as a common effort to sustain voting rights, equal pay and the end of discrimination in any form. Irish America still has much to learn about the depths of discrimination faced by our African American brothers and sisters. And we have our own history of racial prejudice that we must examine and acknowledge.

We urge the great institutions of Irish America, particularly our colleges and universities, as well as our civic and fraternal organizations to address their role in maintaining the institutional racism that has plagued this nation. The work being done by Georgetown University Slavery Project in acknowledging the university's links to slavery is a clear example of what can be done. We encourage the many Irish Studies programs across this country to take up the challenge of exploring in greater depth the linkages, both good and bad, of the Irish and African American experience in America. And we appeal to a rising generation of young Irish Americans to make "good trouble" to overcome injustice.

Above all we call on all Irish Americans to support new racial justice initiatives from removing Confederate names at American military bases to supporting new efforts to expand voting rights now being considered in the Congress. In that spirit, we join the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) in protesting the wrongheaded, commercial decision by Amazon, Walmart and other retailers to sell "Irish Lives Matters" tee shirts. While some may try to excuse such tee shirts as merely an exhibition of ethnic pride, we believe at best that they are tone deaf and insensitive, and at worst a deliberate, cynical attempt to trivialize, diminish or denigrate the BLM. We urge Irish Americans to boycott these sales.

The next few months will be challenging and in the years ahead there will be much work to be done to find a new understanding of what America is to be going forward. Irish America cannot remain comfortably on the sidelines as America seeks to finally put an end to the racial discrimination that has haunted our country.

Sincerely

Cong. Joe Crowley (ret)

Signing on in support of the letter: List in Formation

- Ambassador Elizabeth Frawley Bagley
- James Boland, former President, International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers
- Hon. Brendan Boyle (D –Pa) Member of Congress
- Dennis Brownlee, Founder & President, African American Irish Diaspora Network
- Michael Carroll, President Council on Irish American Relations
- John Connorton, Jr., Board Member, National Committee on American Foreign Policy
- Hon. Michael Cusick, NYS Assemblyman
- Hon. Joe Courtney, (D –Conn), Member of Congress
- Susan Davis, American Ireland Fund
- Hon. John C. Dearie, former NYS Assemblyman & Co-Chair of the Irish American Presidential Forum
- Dan Dennehy, Hudson Valley Irish Center Founding Chair
- Siobhan Dennehy, Executive Director of the Emerald Isle Immigration Center, NYC
- Brian Dooley, author of Black and Green: The Fight for Civil Rights in Northern Ireland and Black America
- Hon. Mike Doyle (D-Pittsburgh), Member of Congress
- John D. Feerick, Professor and former Dean, Fordham University Law School
- Martin S. Flaherty, Fordham University Law School Professor of International Human Rights Law and Founding Co-Director, Leitner Center of International Law and Justice
- Jennifer Frankola, President of the Brehon Law Society of New York.
- John Fitzpatrick, former Chair, American Ireland Fund
- Carolyn Gallaher, Senior Associate Dean, American University School of International Service
- John Gannon, former Chairman National Intelligence Council
- Martin Glennon, past President of the Brehon Law Society of New York
- Loretta Brennan Glucksman, Chair and Founder Glucksman Ireland House NYU and former Chair American Ireland Fund
- Hon. Lawrence Harrington, former Deputy Attorney General State of Tennessee
- Hon. Brian Higgins (D-New York), Member of Congress
- Miriam Nyhan Grey, Director Graduate Studies and Associate Director Glucksman Ireland House, host of ongoing Black, Brown and Green series at NYU.
- Patrick Griffin, Madden-Hennebry Professor of History; Director, Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies, University of Notre Dame
- Hon. Gary Hart, former U.S. Senator
- Hon. Kitty Higgins, former Cabinet Secretary to President Bill Clinton

- Hon. Joe Kennedy III (D. Mass), Member of Congress
- Hon. Timothy Kennedy, New York State Senator
- Kevin Kenny, Glucksman Professor in Irish Studies, NYU, Director, Glucksman Ireland House, NYU
- Hon. Dan Kildee, (D –Michigan), Member of Congress
- Christine Kinealy, Director of Ireland's Great Hunger Institute at Quinnipiac University
- Billy Lawless, Sr. former Senator for the Diaspora, Irish Seanad
- Hon. Richard Larson, (D. Conn), Member of Congress
- Mick Moloney, legendary musician, folklorist and Global Distinguished Professor of Music, Glucksman Ireland House, NYU
- Hon. Edward Markey, U.S. Senator, Massachusetts
- Michael W. Martin, Associate Dean for Experiential Education, Director of Clinical Programs, & Clinical Professor of Law, Fordham University School of Law
- Kimberly Cowell-Meyers, Ph.D. Assistant Professor, Dept. of Government, American University
- Mike McCurry, former White House and State Department Spokesman under President Clinton
- Bruce Morrison, Co-Chair, Ad Hoc Committee to Protect the Good Friday Agreement
- Patricia Cregan Navarra, Director of Irish Studies, Hofstra University, New York; Council Member, American Association of University Professors,
- Hon. Richard Neal, (D-Mass.), Chair, Friends of Ireland Caucus
- Daniel J. O'Connell, National President, Ancient Order of Hibernians
- Niall O'Dowd, publisher of the Irish Voice
- Brian J. O'Dwyer, Grand Marshal 2019 Saint Patrick's Day Parade, NYC
- Brendan O'Leary, Lauder Professor of Political Science, University of Pennsylvania, author of *A Treatise on Northern Ireland*
- Stella O'Leary, President, Irish American Democrats
- Martin O'Malley, former Governor of Maryland
- Kevin O'Malley, former Ambassador to Ireland
- Michael J. O'Neil, former Counsel to House Speaker S. Thomas Foley
- C  il  n Parsons, Associate Professor of English and Director of Global Irish Studies, Georgetown University
- Hon. Mike Quigley (D-Illinois) Member of Congress
- Paul Quinn, American Ireland Fund
- Hon. Kathleen Rice (D – New York), Member of Congress
- Robert Savage, Director, Irish Studies Program, Boston College
- Lenwood Sloan, distinguished lecturer in cultural and heritage programs, Board Director of African American Irish Diaspora Network
- Kevin J. Sullivan, Director, Ad Hoc Committee to Protect the Good Friday Agreement
- Anne E. Sullivan, attorney, consultant for U.S. corporations investing in Northern Ireland
- Robert B. Tierney, former Chairman of the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission.
- Ted Smyth, President of the Advisory Board, Glucksman Ireland House, NYU

- Nancy Soderberg, Ambassador, Former National Security Advisor to President Clinton
- Colm Toibin, author, Professor Department of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia and Chancellor of Liverpool University.
- Mark H. Tuohey, Member, Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland
- James Walsh, Co-Chair Ad Hoc Committee to Protect the Good Friday Agreement
- Ben Walsh, Mayor of Syracuse, New York
- Keri Walsh, Associate Professor of English and Director of the Institute of Irish Studies, Fordham University, New York
- Hon. Peter Welch (D –Vermont), Member of Congress
- Bonnie Weir, Co-Director, Program on Peace and Development, Yale University
- Carol Wheeler, Founder, Washington Ireland Program

While the overwhelming majority of the signatures are Irish Americans we are pleased that several other distinguished Americans have signed on to the letter given their long history of engagement with the peace process in Northern Ireland. These individuals are acutely aware of the example that leaders of the American civil rights community like John Lewis had on the Northern Ireland civil rights struggles.